

# Benton-Franklin justice system gets technical



Tri-City Herald/Bob Brawdy - Franklin County Clerk Mike Killian demonstrates the barcode reader and iPad system court clerks in Benton-Franklin judicial system recently started using to scan in jurors. Officials say it has shaved about 40 minutes to an hour off the check-in process. See story below.

Jurors are repeatedly reminded not to research legal terms on the internet, visit crime scenes on their own or read news stories to make sure their decision is based only on testimony and evidence presented in court.

Yet, more and more reports are surfacing across the country about jurors tapping into their smartphones and computers in the middle of a trial to share their experience on social media.

What might seem like an innocent "status update" or a tweet about a witness could be detrimental to the case and lead to a dismissal of the juror, a halt to the trial or even a verdict's reversal if the misconduct isn't discovered until later.

The issue has court officials across Washington trying to avert problems by encouraging jurors to keep their focus inside the courtroom so all parties get a fair trial.

The campaign started last month with the distribution of posters in all state court jury rooms.

The poster -- featuring a cellphone with restrictions for jurors -- is just one of many changes in the Benton-Franklin judicial system, as judges and court officials try to keep paperwork and hearings moving at an efficient pace.

While advances in technology have created a headache in some courtrooms, it is helping speed along the process in the bicounty Superior Court, where clerks now use iPads to register potential jurors as they arrive.

Administrator Pat Austin believes the court is the first in the country with the juror system check-in.

Court clerks use a scanner that is no bigger than a tube of lipstick, hold it over the barcode on the jury summons and the information is relayed through Wi-fi from the iPad back to the jury management database and updated in real time.

So instead of inconveniencing jurors by having them move around to different rooms in the courthouse as they get checked in, a big group can be scanned in all at once and stay in one jury room or courtroom, Austin said.

Benton County Superior Court clerks and the Administrator's Office each have two iPads and Franklin County clerks have one. The iPads were bought as part of a trial court improvement project and also are being used by administrators to communicate from the courtroom with the case management system in their offices.

The Legislature reallocates money back to each county based on its number of District Court judges. That money, which comes from the judges' salaries, along with a separate allotment from case filing fees, must be used in local courts for improvements.

Austin said there is a bicounty committee that meets each January to decide what is needed to keep the courts running efficiently. Benton County gets about \$30,000 per quarter and Franklin County got \$25,000 for 2011.

Along with the jury check-in program, Benton County court officials plan to buy new headsets for interpreters; a revamped sound system in two courtrooms over the next three years; and improved audio in the jail courtroom that is used by District Court.

Also in January, airport-style readerboards will be installed on a wall just inside the security checkpoint at the Benton County Justice Center. Superior Court and District Court cases will be listed alphabetically and show the courtroom where each one is being handled in attempt to cut down on the number of questions that clerks and administrative employees get from confused people, Austin said.

She said the state money has "really helped the county out, as well as the courts .... We've been able to get some improvements without taxing funds that are needed for other projects."

Franklin County Clerk Mike Killian said the money paid for the jury software program in the county's Superior Court and District Court, as well as for Pasco Municipal Court.

And the new iPad is helping his jury clerk shave at least 40 minutes to an hour off the check-in process.

Killian hasn't had any problems with jurors tweeting about a case or looking for outside information, but he said the new poster is a good reminder for them to be careful.

"The state is being proactive ... to discuss and bring to our attention the importance and that these things can happen and do happen," he said. "Mistrials are very expensive, so if they can prevent something like that from happening, that benefits all of us -- all the taxpayers."

The cellphone poster was created by the Washington Pattern Jury Instructions Committee and paid for with private money at no cost to taxpayers.

"We recognize that, in their normal 21st century lives, jurors may routinely post information about all of their activities on websites and are probably accustomed to using the internet to get quick answers to any question that might arise," said Judge William Downing, who sits on the bench in King County Superior Court and is co-chairman of the state committee.

"Because these are such natural impulses in our electronic age, jurors will benefit from a gentle reminder that their duty to provide a fair trial requires them to postpone these activities until after their trial is finished," he said in a release about the project.

Austin said it has been a year or two, but the biconounty court has had jurors who have taken it upon themselves to look up something, such as a legal term, a newspaper clipping or prior offenses for a defendant. Someone will share that information, and soon the bailiff and judge must address the issue.

"So far it's just been a dismissal of the juror because we've found out about it before they contaminated the rest of the jury pool," she said. "I hope (the poster) will bring a little more awareness to people that those things are restricted."

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/12/04/1740763/benton-franklin-justice-system.html#ixzz1fhn2GOkB>